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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BRUSSELS 000458

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NSC FOR WILSON, STERLING

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SUBJECT: BELARUS: EU TRENDING TOWARD ENGAGEMENT WITH REGIME

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Classified By: USEU Acting Political Minister Counselor Alyce Tidball,
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

EU Increasingly Swayed by Germany

1.(C) The EU is in a dilemma as it tries to balance two contradictory policy desires toward Belarus: Transatlantic unity and "constructive engagement." The European Commission and Germany are moving EU member states in Brussels away from the former and toward the latter. Germany has unusual influence in the policy debate as it is widely considered to be the leading Member State authority on Belarus within the EU. Member States may be ready to abandon a tough line on Belarus for a variety of reasons including economic interests (Germany, Lithuania), philosophical aversion to sanctions (Italy, Sweden), bad information (smaller member states with no presence in Minsk), and fear of provoking Russia and/or pushing Belarus farther into Russia's arms (France, other Mediterranean and East European countries). Some EU Member States also appear to have become more open to "engagement" with Belarus given that the EU is unlikely to be equally tough in its reaction to recent regressive trends in Armenia and Georgia.

Those who align more closely with the United States (UK, Poland) are in a dwindling minority. The Brits here have even intimated to us they now see their role as bridging the gap between what they see as two fundamentally different approaches.

HOMS Are No Help

2.(C) Aware of U.S. views on the controversial German Ambassador to Belarus, one EU contact pointed out that "there are now many (Ambassador) Weiss's in the ranks of the EU Heads of Missions (HOMS)" in Minsk. Responding to a tasking from the Council's Political and Security Committee, the EU HOMS in Minsk recently forwarded a list of recommendations for removal of current EU sanctions against Minsk in the event of Alexandr Kazulin's release. Among the HOMS' recommendations to be debated by experts in Brussels on March 31 are a six month suspension of sanctions against the entire Presidential Administration except Lukashenko, as well as the maintenance of sanctions against judges and prosecutors unless it is clear that harassment of the political opposition has ceased. The HOMS proposals starkly contrast with those put forward by Council Secretariat staff which recommended a more narrow suspension of the visa ban against judges and prosecutors, as well as for the Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration Madame Petkevich, and possibly the Speaker of the Parliament.

What they really think

3.(C) While Member States and EU institutions have carefully

avoided direct criticism of U.S. tactical approach to Minsk, some have reportedly been sniping privately that Belarusian pressure on the U.S. Embassy in Minsk was not unprovoked. Moreover, some European diplomats resented our lack of prior consultation on the March 6 U.S. Treasury's public announcement clarifying U.S. economic sanctions on Belneftikim. According to a friendly Council Secretariat contact, High Rep Solana himself wants to show solidarity with the United States in the face of Belarusian intimidation. We told our Secretariat contact that that this impulse is not being translated into action on the ground in Minsk and that a clear statement of support was needed. A handful of EU contacts (Greece, Council Secretariat, Slovene Presidency) opined privately that the EU would be unlikely to achieve consensus on a strong statement of support for the U.S. Embassy.

If Kazulin Release were announced

4.(C) So far, USG demarche points for the EU have highlighted the importance of avoiding the impression of a US-EU split that would be fostered by a Commission Delegation Office opening in the midst of a forced U.S. drawdown or closure. Based on our recent discussions with EU institutional and Permrep officials, we cannot rule out the possibility that at least some in the EU -- including some of the most influential member states -- would be feckless enough to accept Lukashenko's terms for Kazulin's release, even if the effective closure of the U.S. Embassy in Minsk were one of them. The bottom line appears to be that the EU is reverting to trying to work with the regime in Minsk, with little thought thus far about the broader potential implications for Transatlantic cooperation in Belarus or the elsewhere in the region.

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